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Indicting the Soviets

When Soviet negotiators walked out of the Geneva medium-range nuclear arms talks, they triggered a fateful decision by President Reagan to send the Senate a precise list of alleged Soviet SALT violations—the first time the United States has ever accused the Russians of cheating on treaty obligations.

The president has informed top aides of his decision to comply with the Senate's request, voted overwhelmingly after the KAL 007 disaster. When the record arrives on Capitol Hill in January, it will end feuding among high-level Reaganites on the cheating issue. This has pitted senior presidential aides James A. Baker III and Michael K. Deaver against Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and, when he served as national security adviser, Interior Secretary William Clark. The president's decision to go public also overrides advice of his wife, Nancy, not a common occurrence in the White House.

Reagan's decision strengthens the feeling here that, starting with the Korean Air Lines incident, the Kremlin has been on the run. Backed into a politically weak position by its boycott of the Geneva talks, Moscow will be hard put to explain away the carefully researched U.S. record of treaty noncompliance.

That should mitigate anti-Reagan sentiment in the nuclear freeze movement. "We are going to push this thing hard, and we have the evidence to do it," a key administration official told us. His words promise an all-out campaign to show citizens of the West where danger of nuclear war comes from: the Soviet nuclear buildup and violations of treaties designed to safeguard the balance of nuclear terror.

Boiled down, these are the violations the president will allege:

- A huge new radar in Southern Siberia. The CIA calls this an indisputable violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the heart of SALT I signed by President Nixon in 1972.

- Continued testing of a second "new type" of long-range ballistic missile. Only one is permitted by SALT II, the unratified agreement that both countries agreed to abide by.

- The discovery by reconnaissance satellites, not yet publicly known, that Soviet Backfires are deployed as intercontinental bombers on the Kola Peninsula above Scandinavia. As part of SALT II, Leonid Brezhnev pledged in writing that the Backfire never would be used as an intercontinental bomber.

- Wholesale encryption of data from missile test flights, a violation of SALT II.

Beyond these allegations, Reagan may shock the Soviets with another accusation of an entirely different character: a charge of blatant refusal to abide by human rights pledges made at the 1975 Helsinki Conference on European Security. That would carry the president's attack beyond U.S.-Soviet bilateral relations to affect, perhaps profoundly, European signers of the Helsinki accords.

Two documents are now getting final editing touches on Soviet treaty violations. The one to be sent to Capitol Hill is under control of National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane. The other, written expressly and only for Reagan and a few top officials, is a 300-page document drafted by the General Advisory Committee to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

The second document, kept under lock and key, is said to be an unprecedented examination of every foreign obligation entered into by the Soviets since 1917. It includes the first analysis of SALT violations by nongovernment, outside specialists.

Ever since taking office, Ronald Reagan has favored a frank, frontal approach to the Russians on SALT violations. But, like his predecessors, he was always advised: Wait, now is not the right time to move. That advice got muscle from the Nancy Reagan-Baker-Deaver trio worried that nuclear challenges to Moscow would smudge their dream of Reagan as 1984 peace candidate.

The president has ruled otherwise in a courageous, long-overdue decision, helped along by Soviet bullying in Geneva. His whistle-blowing leads the two superpowers into new, uncharted terrain.

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